

Federal Bureau of Prisons
Prison Social Climate Survey*:
A Conceptual and Methodological Overview

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This document provides a brief overview of the Prison Social Climate Survey (PSCS) and is intended to introduce readers to the plan of the project--survey design and administration, sampling methods, and procedures for data collection. A reference list of articles that address key analytical topics and answer various research questions using PSCS data is included as an appendix.

The PSCS¹ is an annual study of staff perceptions and attitudes about an array of issues within Federal correctional facilities--including the care and custody of inmates, and the personal well-being of staff. The PSCS was developed to measure aspects of life within prison that are meaningful and useful to correctional administrators. In this effort, the two main goals of the project are to:

(1) Document changes staff are experiencing in their workplace and to better understand how these experiences are affecting staff, and the way in which the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) achieves its mission; and (2) Provide BOP managers with information that will help them in monitoring many aspects of BOP operations and in evaluating programs, and assessing strategic goals and the impact of policies.

The approach used for this study is referred to as subjective because staff perceptions or beliefs provide the means for characterizing conditions in prison environments (i.e., the climates). Considerable research suggests that an organization's climates determine staff productivity, performance, satisfaction, and personal growth. Given the concerns of the project, it is important to collect staff views, or subjective data, because many of the topics of interest are best obtained using this method (e.g., level of job satisfaction, job-related stress and safety concerns). Also, this approach allows management to compare subjective and objective data about facilities. For example, staff perceptions of the likelihood of an inmate assault can be compared to the (objective) actual number of assaults on inmates.

¹There is also an inmate version of the PSCS, which was designed to be comparable to the staff instrument (where meaningful comparisons can be made). The inmate survey is administered on an ad hoc basis, mostly in conjunction with program evaluations. This discussion, however, relates exclusively to the staff PSCS.

Survey Design

The PSCS addresses a broad range of areas of concern to prison management in six sections: socio-demographic; personal safety and security; quality of life; personal well-being; work environment; and a special interest section. Each section contains several types of related items. Questionnaire items have been added and deleted since the survey's annual implementation in 1988. However, the basic content of the survey remains largely unchanged. The PSCS was designed so that the responses could be optically scanned.

The response categories for PSCS questions vary from Likert-type formats and binary (yes/no) categories to questions where respondents write in a specific response (e.g., the proportion of inmates who are idle and counts or percentages of events such as the number of assaults). The majority of the questions, however, follow the Likert format and ask respondents to report their perceptions on either a six or seven point scale that ranges from either "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" or from "never" to "all the time" (or every day). Some questions may include an "undecided", "no knowledge," or "not applicable" response category for staff who may not be familiar with an issue, who are unsure, or to whom an issue does not apply.

Most questions ask that staff respond to the various items based on their experiences in the prior six months. But a few items require staff to consider the past year, where this extended period is more applicable.

Some PSCS data are compiled as scales. Scales are used to measure concepts that cannot be assessed reliably by one question alone due to its many aspects (e.g., quality of supervision). Therefore, scale scores reflect responses to groups of PSCS questions that address a common concept. Two or more questionnaire items that are related to the concept being measured are used together to form a valid and reliable scale.

Scale Score Calculations: Responses to the individual items of each scale are summed, divided by the total number of items in each scale, and then rounded to integers associated with the response categories for the individual items. In effect, an average score is computed for each respondent based on his\her responses to the group of questions that make up a particular scale.

Six PSCS Sections

A brief description of each section is provided along with a few example items. All scales included in this listing are followed by the items that compose it.

1. Socio-Demographic

This section collects respondent personal (e.g., race, age, and gender) and work characteristics (e.g., Federal and BOP tenure, inmate contact, job duties, and PSCS experience).

What has been your predominant shift over the past six months?
How many inmates would you say you have contact with each month?
How well can you speak and understand Spanish?
How well can you read in Spanish?
Are you a supervisor of any BOP or UNICOR (federal prisons industries) staff?
How long have you been working for the BOP?
Please indicate the department for which you work.

2. Personal Safety and Security

Respondents give their impressions of the overall safety of the living and working conditions of their facility in this section. Inmate behavior, emergency preparedness, and security and controls are among the topics covered.

How safe are male staff members?
How safe are female staff members?
How likely do you think it is that an inmate would be assaulted in this institution?
In what area do you think it is most likely that an assault would take place?
How free do you feel inmates have been to move about this institution?
Do you think there have been enough staff here to provide for the safety and security of inmates?
Does your position require safety equipment?
Are shakedowns done frequently enough?
Have you responded to an emergency in the past six months?

3. Quality of Life

The overall quality of living and working conditions at facilities is the focus of this section. The topics covered include: institution sanitation and safety; crowding; inmate idleness; inmate services and programs; and staff and inmate grievances.

How crowded are inmate housing units?
How crowded are areas outside of the housing units?
Have you ever had an administrative remedy filed against you?
How many inmates do you think are housed in this facility?
How many inmates do you think this institution can effectively and safely manage?
How often are inmate housing units inspected?

4. Personal Well-Being

This section focuses on some of the effects of stress. Staff are asked to report information about their health and family concerns.

Psychological Symptoms Scale - This scaled item is composed of the following 10 individual questions:

1. A feeling of hopelessness.
2. A difficulty in concentrating.
3. A feeling of worthlessness.
4. A feeling of depression.
5. A feeling that you are worrying too much.
6. A feeling that nothing turns out right for you.
7. A wondering if anything is worthwhile.
8. A feeling of frustration by your job.
9. A feeling that everything is going wrong.
10. A feeling of being very angry.

Personal Concerns Scale- This scaled item is composed of the following 3 individual questions:

1. Personal worries that bother you.
2. A feeling of worry about your family.
3. A feeling of worry about money problems.

Response categories of the individual questions for the above scales: "never," "a few times," "once a month," "a few times a month," "once a week," "a few times a week," and "everyday."

5. Work Environment

Items related to institutional/organizational operations, job satisfaction, training, staff /superior communication, job advancement, salary, transfers, and benefits, and sexual harassment of staff and inmates are covered in this area of the PSCS.

I am willing to transfer?

There are job advancements for me?

There are job advancements for minorities?

There are job advancements for females?

Management at this facility promotes an atmosphere that encourages staff to treat each other respectfully.

My supervisor is committed to ensuring the work environment is free of offensive behavior of asexual nature.

Institutional/Organizational Operations Scale - This scaled item is composed of the following 10 individual questions:

1. The information I get through formal communications channels helps me to perform my job effectively.
2. In the BOP, it is often unclear who has the formal authority to make a decision.
3. It's really not possible to change things in the institution.
4. I am told promptly when there is a change in policy, rules, or regulations that affects me.
5. I have the authority I need to accomplish my work objectives.
6. Employees do not have much opportunity to influence what goes on in the BOP.
7. Under the present system, promotions are seldom related to employee performance.
8. Management at this institution is flexible enough to make changes when necessary.
9. In the BOP, authority is clearly delegated.
10. In general, this institution is run very well.

The response categories for the above individual questions are "strongly disagree," "disagree," "somewhat disagree," "undecided," "somewhat agree," "agree," and "strongly agree."

Quality of Supervision Scale - This scaled item is composed of the following 10 individual questions in the *Work Environment* section of the survey:

1. My supervisor engages me in the planning process, such as developing work methods and procedures for my job.
2. My supervisor gives me adequate information on how well I am performing.
3. My supervisor asks my opinion when a work-related problem arises.
4. I have a great deal of say over what has to be done on my job.
5. On my job, I know what my supervisor expects of me.
6. The standards used to evaluate my performance have been fair and objective.
7. The information I receive about my performance usually comes too late for it to be of any use to me.
8. My last annual performance rating presented a fair and accurate picture of my actual job performance.
9. My own hard work will lead to recognition as a good performer.
10. I often receive feedback from my supervisor for good performance.

The response categories for the above individual questions are "strongly disagree," "disagree," "somewhat disagree," "undecided," "somewhat agree," "agree," and "strongly agree."

6. Special Interest Section.

The topics covered in this section could vary each year according to special BOP initiatives and projects. The topics included in the 1999 version of the PSCS were as follows: the staff training program; supervision of inmates; diversity in the workplace and in the inmate population; and staff/management grievance matters.

1. I believe I can work effectively in a diverse work force.
2. Please indicate the training you have received during the past year.
3. Did the training improve your ability to work with inmates?
4. How confident are you that you fully understand BOP policy regarding the procedures for conducting pat searches of inmates?
5. During the past six months, did you work primarily with female or male inmates?
6. What impact do you think the Labor and Management Partnership Council has had on the operation of this facility?

Four Versions of the PSCS

The complete PSCS contains all six sections. This full version was administered in the early history of the project. In 1991, four different versions of the PSCS were developed to minimize respondent burdens, especially with regard to the time required to complete the survey. Each version contains the socio-demographic section and two or more of the remaining areas. The current arrangement of the sections within versions is listed below:

Version 1: Personal Safety and Security and an Abbreviated Work Environment Section.

Version 2: Full Work Environment Section, Personal Well-Being and the Special Interest Section.

Version 3: Quality of Life, an Abbreviated Work Environment section, and the Special Interest Section.

Version 4: Full Work Environment Section, Quality of Life, and the Special Interest Section.

The Abbreviated Work Environment section only contains the individual questions that comprise the work environment scale items and questions about staff-on-staff sexual misconduct.

Sampling Methods

Only correctional facilities that have been active or on-line with inmates for at least six months prior to the day survey administration begins are selected from the existing facilities. This ensures that all respondents are able to consider at least six months of experience at their current facility when responding to PSCS questions, which mostly require a minimal six-month reference period.

Staff are then selected from each qualifying facility (via the BOP's staff automated management information system) using a stratified proportional probability sampling technique that segments the population according to the presence or absence of five characteristics: employment in UNICOR (federal prison industries); racial or ethnic minority status; gender; supervisory status and custody position. A proportional random selection from each category of these sample variables is then made.

Staff are selected at random to participate, with the exception of institutions that have less than 100 staff members. At these facilities, all staff are selected. This ensures that there are enough respondents to present results for each of the survey sections and for as many staff subgroups as possible. Also, because most facilities only have a few Public Health Service (PHS) staff, a census is conducted for this subgroup; that is, all PHS staff are included in a facility's sample.

To ensure that each of the four versions of the survey has approximately the same number of staff members responding to it, sampled staff members are divided into four groups according to their birth day and month-based on the list below. For example, someone born on March 24 would get version 1.

Version 1: odd month, even day
Version 2: odd month, odd day
Version 3: even month, even day
Version 4: even month, odd day

PSCS samples have generally reflected the characteristics of the overall staff population. For example, the percentage of females in the 1998 PSCS sample was 26%, while females made up 26.9% of the overall staff population during the same period. The representativeness of a sample is important in interpreting survey results. The more representative the sample, the more reliable the results.

Procedures:

Survey Administration and Data Collection

Each facility is required to appoint a contact person for the project. The PSCS contact is provided a sample list of staff members who are to receive the questionnaire as well as the exact version of the survey to distribute to each staff member. The sample list is included in the shipment of questionnaires, which are mailed to each institution contact directly from a company hired to produce, distribute, and optically scan the completed surveys.

Although staff are required to receive a copy of the questionnaire, their participation in this project is voluntary. The PSCS takes about 45 minutes to complete. Institutions must conduct mandatory staff meetings (one or more, contingent upon local circumstances) for the distribution, voluntary completion, and centralized collection of the survey. Past experience has shown that institutions that used the staff recall method gained good cooperation and thus had higher response rates than those that used other methods of distribution. When this method was first instituted, for the second administration in 1989, the project experienced a considerable increase in the overall response rate--from about 40% to more than 70%.

The surveys that are centrally collected (at recalls) are returned via overnight mail (immediately following each recall). This method allows institutions to track the transport of the surveys and to be informed of their delivery. Institutions are required to keep a record of the number of surveys and boxes sent, the date they are sent, and the air bill number. However, individuals who are unable to complete the survey during the recall are afforded work time to do so. These staff may return the survey to the institution PSCS contact to be included in the bulk shipment or they may return it separate via regular mail in the pre-addressed, franked envelope provided. Completed questionnaires are returned directly to the hired company for optical scanning within 2 weeks after the questionnaires are received by the institution.

PSCS contacts also note on the sample list provided by the Office of Research (ORE) any staff member who is unavailable to receive the questionnaire and return the list directly to ORE at the earliest possible date. Contacts also include the specific reason each particular staff member was unable to receive the questionnaire. This type of nonresponse could result if staff have been transferred, on temporary-duty (TDY) or extended leave during the administration period.

Response Rate Calculation

The institution response rate is calculated by dividing the number of surveys returned by the number of staff who received the survey. Staff who were not available to receive the survey are not included in the response rate calculation.

If 400 staff are sampled and 20 staff are not available to receive the survey then only 380 staff would have received the survey.

If 320 surveys are returned, then the response rate would be: $(320/380)*100=84.2\%$.

In the past five administrations, the overall project response rate has hovered around 88%.

PSCS Results

ORE processes and summarizes all PSCS data so that no individual respondents can be identified. Individual responses of staff who completed the survey are combined (or aggregated) for each facility to produce the results of the survey at the institutional and regional levels, and also for all security levels and the BOP overall. ORE provides a mechanism for producing reports of the PSCS results via the BOP's Key Indicators/Strategic Support System. The results are presented in terms of the percent of favorable responses for thirty different staff subgroups (e.g., all respondents, females, males, non-supervisory staff, supervisory staff, minority staff and non-minority staff). Institution level data are also organized into percentile rankings within their respective region and security level.

Analytical Issues and PSCS Publications

Several studies have been conducted to answer specific research questions using PSCS information. A reference list of articles is included as an appendix to provide direction for understanding and analyzing PSCS data. The articles cover a variety of topics. One article in particular, *The Correspondence of Objective and Subjective Measures of Prison Climates*, describes the distinction and relationship between objective and subjective data. (The PSCS provides subjective information.) The authors explain that some consistency or similarity in subjective and objective measures may be expected. They argue that an assessment of the conformity of these measures may help identify the more useful estimates and those that may require further examination to account for discrepancies. To request copies of this article and other references listed in the appendix, contact William Saylor (ext. 5-4171) at 202-307-3871. These sources provide a full picture of the importance of capturing various analytical perspectives in studying organizational climates.

APPENDIX:
PSCS OVERVIEW

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